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‘We Want Women?’: An Examination of Female Political Leadership During National Public
Health Crises

by

Kelsi Rae Quick

Under the Direction of Ryan E. Carlin, PhD

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

While crises of terrorism have often prompted preference for male leadership, COVID-19 poses an ideal situation for examining the impact of gender stereotypes on executive approval in a new type of crisis tied to public health, seen as more of a 'woman's domain.' Employing a survey experiment to examine public perception of male and female political leadership during different types of hypothetical national crises (terrorism v. highly contagious virus), this study ultimately finds that there is not a significant difference in average approval ratings between male and female executives in the virus crisis context, and a small difference with females outperforming men in the terrorist context. This study also reveals a few unexpected findings; while female executives seem to perform well in both crisis contexts, results indicate that male executives receive significantly higher approval in the virus context than in the terrorism context, providing an important avenue for future research.

INDEX WORDS: Gender, Women, Public opinion, COVID-19, Executive approval, Terrorism

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‘We Want Women?’: An Examination of Female Political Leadership During National Public
Health Crises

by

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December 2021

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Kim Heglund, John Jameson, Joni Jameson, Kevin Lewis, and Allan Rakoweicki, for teaching me that asking questions is the key to success and that context means everything. And to my family, for their endless support and abundant encouragement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my mentor and committee head, Dr. Ryan Carlin, for his continuous support and guidance throughout the entirety of this project. This project would not have been possible without his abundance of kindness and patience. Furthermore, I owe him a depth of gratitude for the years of mentorship that he's given me, from my very first semester at Georgia State University, to my last. He has taught me so much, and I would not be where I am now without him.

Besides my advisor, I would also like to thank the rest of my thesis committee, Dr. Sarah Gershon and Dr. Toby Bolsen, for their encouragement, insightful feedback, and tough questions that ultimately elevated my research. I am incredibly grateful for their time and patience.

I would also like to thank Instructor Abdelrahman Rashdan and Dr. Charles Hankla for their assistance in shaping the ideas and questions at various times in my college career that would ultimately form the foundation for this project. This project would not exist in its current form without them.

Lastly, I would also like to thank Dr. Chris Brown for his years of continued support, feedback, and motivation. I would not be the student I am today without having benefitted from his knowledge and instruction over the years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF TABLES	VIII
LIST OF FIGURES	IX
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	2
1.1 National Crises	3
1.2 Gendered Trait-Based Stereotypes.....	4
1.3 Female Leadership Advantage Theory and Stereotype Activation.....	6
2 THEORY	8
2.1 Hypotheses	12
3 METHOD	13
3.1 Experiment Design.....	13
3.1.1 <i>Treatments</i>	15
3.1.2 <i>Dependent Variable</i>	15
3.1.3 <i>Controls</i>	16
3.2 Procedure.....	16
3.3 Data	18
4 RESULTS	18
5 CONCLUSION	23

REFERENCE.....	28
APPENDIX.....	33

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Full 2x2 Factorial Design	14
Table 4.1 Female Executive Approval During Highly Contagious Virus	20

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Survey Questionnaire Template	17
Figure 3.2 Manipulation Check Question One	17
Figure 3.3 Manipulation Check Question Two.....	18
Figure 4.1 Average Executive Approval, All Scenarios.....	19
Figure 4.2 Distribution of Survey Responses	22

INTRODUCTION

The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic presents a new context for examining the impact of gender stereotypes on how women are evaluated as political executives during times of crises or the presence of an exogenous threat. Discussions regarding gender and crisis leadership have often focused on terrorism, which often invokes a public preference for male political executives over their female counterparts. Unlike terrorism, COVID-19 is a crisis of public health, a domain where female politicians are traditionally preferred over men.

The association between COVID-19 and women's leadership has prompted questions about if women are perhaps better leaders than men in public health crises. In fact, many have asked this question as Western media has paid special attention to female-led countries in which COVID-19 cases have decreased and/or have been eliminated. For example, an article published in *The Guardian* at the height of the COVID-19 crisis was entitled "The Secret Weapon in the Fight Against Coronavirus: Women" and focused on Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, and New Zealand- all countries with a woman as political executive- and asserted that although being a woman doesn't inherently make you a better leader for health crises (as that notion is still based in sexism and stereotyping), women generally have had to be better and more effective leaders in order to become political leaders in the first place due to the sexism they had to fight on their way to the top (Mahdawi 2020).

Inspired by the question of whether the public may view female leaders more favorably than men during COVID-19, Piazza and Diaz (2020) argue that certain exceptional circumstances can activate traditional stereotypes and increase support for women political candidates/leaders. They further argue that because COVID-19 is a public health crisis, women, as a result of being stereotypically more associated with issue areas that "require" more

'feminine' qualities such as public health, may benefit more politically in such exceptional circumstances (Piazza and Diaz 2020). Their conclusion aligns with the implications of dominant theories regarding gender-based stereotypes of political executives during crises, although the specific context of public health as a type of crisis has not yet been explored extensively on a theoretical or empirical level.

Given that traditional gender stereotypes indicate that women would theoretically be better suited than men to handle issues that require compassion and a nurturing perspective, such as public health crises, then female political leaders' evaluations should reflect this expectation; they receive higher public approval in these exceptional circumstances than men in similar positions and, perhaps, women who do not display such characteristics. If empirical testing does indeed indicate a difference in the public's executive accountability due to a political executive's gender and crisis context (terrorism v. COVID-19), there are several important implications. On an empirical and theoretical level, existing literature on gender and crisis leadership would benefit from the conclusions that can be drawn when directly comparing a traditional crisis context (terrorism) to a new context (a highly contagious virus). On a normative level, this research is incredibly important due to the lack of female political representation globally, as "there has never been more than 19 female leaders at one time, less than 10% of all leadership" (O'Neill 2021). Rather than focusing on the ways that men have been favored over women in the political sphere, this thesis aims to explore a possible realm of the political sphere where women may thrive.

1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Citizens often see political executives as a least partially responsible for their wellbeing. Public opinion, particularly executive approval ratings, thus provide an important indication of how the

public feels about a current leader's handling of a specific situation and, to some extent, their ability to hold leaders accountable for outcomes. Approval dynamics, however, are subject to a predictable election cycle (Stimson 1970; Carlin et al. 2018; Louwerse & Müller 2020) and respond to fluctuations in the economy, crime, and corruption (Magalhães 2020; Mueller 1970). Even more influential on executive approval are exceptional events, 'shocks', that can sometimes decrease public approval but more often offer a significant boost to approval.

1.1 National Crises

The most observed exceptional circumstance that impacts executive approval is that of terrorism, which often results in a significant boost in approval ratings for a leader. This effect, known as the "rally 'round the flag effect," is a prime example of how the public can be prone to evaluate leaders more highly when exceptional circumstances present themselves (Mueller 1970; Hetherington and Nelson 2003). 9/11 is the most popular example of the rally effect as the American public, faced with such an extreme exogenous threat, responded by rallying in support of President Bush, so much so that he subsequently experienced a surge in popularity that lasted well over a year as a result (Gregg 2003; Gronke and Newman 2003). Rally effects in response to national security crises are not just characteristic of presidential systems but have also been observed in parliamentary democracies such as France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, and is thus described as being the "rule" for responses during times of terrorism especially (Chowanietz 2011).

Given that terrorism is a particularly threatening type of exogenous shock that can impact approval rating, it is unsurprising that research on rally effects/ surges in approval outside of incidents of terrorism is underdeveloped. COVID-19 presents an opportunity to broaden the study of executive approval during national crises, as it too is an exogenous shock that in theory

would direct a lot of attention to the political executives in charge of the well-being of the nation. Preliminary research focused on Western European countries released by Bol et. al (2020) suggests that although there is not enough evidence to indicate a rally effect specifically, there were still increases in approval during COVID-19 that can instead be explained by retrospective performance evaluation, in which “citizens have had to understand that strict social confinement measures were necessary and have increased their support for those responsible for this policy” (p. 6). However, Yam et al. (2020) offers contradictory evidence as they found that rally effects could in fact be observed, even across geographically and culturally diverse countries. They do note that some rally effects are stronger than others, though they do not explore why. Herrera et al. in a working paper (2020) assert that rally effects can be observed and informally answers the question left open by Yam et al (2020) that the rally effects are facilitated by the public basing their approval of the incumbent on their implementation (or lack) of lockdown policies. Evidence for COVID-19 leading to rally effects is fairly clear as many studies do ultimately acknowledge that general increases in executive approval occurred for many leaders during the crisis, which ultimately provides a sufficient basis for viewing COVID-19 as an exogenous shock that has the potential to facilitate increases in executive approval, just like terrorism (Bol et al. 2020; Herrera et al. 2020; Yam et al. 2020). While these studies establish a foundation for viewing COVID-19 as an exogenous threat that can induce increased approval, they do not examine the possibility of systematic gendered differences in approval or whether the rallies vary based on executive trait expression and/or stereotypes, highlighting a gap in current literature.

1.2 Gendered Trait-Based Stereotypes

Although COVID-19 and terrorism are quite different types of exogenous shocks that may impact executive approval, they do have something in common. Gendered stereotypes based on

trait expression in political executives influence executive approval, especially in crisis situations. Most of the existing research on the effect of gender on executive approval during national crises has focused on the security-based crisis of terrorism. COVID-19, being a very new and unprecedented crisis on a national and global scale, has not received the same level of scrutiny that terrorism crises have. As such, the answer to whether and how gender stereotypes impact executive approval during a public health crisis such as COVID-19 remains to be seen, and then compared, to the traditional concept of crisis leadership, which focuses on terrorism.

Gender-based stereotypes and the impact they have when it comes to electing or evaluating women in politics remains a hotly contested topic with various scholars asserting contradictory evidence and theories. Although different theories abound regarding the impact of gender stereotypes on executive approval or public opinion more generally, most scholars agree on what exactly the gender-based stereotypes *are* when it comes to men and women. Men are consistently seen as more likely to display *agentic* characteristics, whereas women are more likely to be associated with *communal* traits (Eagly and Karau 2002). Agentic behavior is thus defined according to Eagly and Karau's (2002) seminal study and can be described as "assertive, controlling, and confident tendency—for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident" (p. 574). They define communal traits as "primarily a concern with the welfare of other people—for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle" (p. 574).

Competencies for handling different types of political issues are often informed by the agentic v. communal framework and are thus also often gendered, with men typically being perceived as more competent in issues of security and trade and women as more competent with issues such as education and health care (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen

1993; Lawless 2004). In equating men with agentic traits and women with communal traits, the policy areas of security, trade, education, and health care, for example, are seen as more 'suitable' for a certain type of trait expressions than others. For example, the issue area of terrorism requires strict security measures and ultimately has been aligned with the need for leadership that demonstrates agentic traits, which are traditionally coded as 'masculine,' and thus call for male leadership (Lawless 2004). When attention is turned to the new context of a public health crisis, Herrera et al. (2020) has found that COVID-19 has also been conceived of as a crisis that calls for strict security measures, like terrorism. Specifically, Herrera et al. (2020) found that governments that *fail* to impose strict security measures during the pandemic were more likely to experience a decline in approval, demonstrating that COVID-19 is another exogenous shock to which the public expects *at least* an agentic response (communal responses to be discussed in following section). If so, then gender stereotypes may also be activated.

If traditionally gendered trait-based stereotypes are indeed applied when the public evaluates political executives, we would expect to see differences in executive accountability depending on the context of the crisis. Public opinion would thus be based on perceived differences in competence on the basis of gender for different policy areas. Carlin et. al (2020) provides further support of this proposition. Their research indicated that approval for male and female presidents was consistent with gendered trait-based stereotypes: female presidents were more likely to be punished with lower approval ratings for failures in security and corruption, an agentic policy area, than their male counterparts.

1.3 Female Leadership Advantage Theory and Stereotype Activation

If women are, as Carlin et al. (2020) suggested, punished more strictly for failures in a political issue area that is typically considered a 'man's domain' such as national security, perhaps the

reverse is true. That is, there may be 'women's domains' in which women are more greatly rewarded than men for successes. In an effort to address the question if and when female leaders may hold a certain political advantage, researchers have investigated stereotype activation and the possibility of women utilizing stereotypes strategically to enhance their approval ratings. Stereotypes, although they can be harmful for female politicians especially (Lawless 2004; Holman et al. 2011; Falk and Kenski 2006), have also been found to be politically useful if used strategically (Bauer 2018; Herrnson et. al 2003; Ponton 2010). A steady assumption that emerged in the field after 9/11 has been that women will do better in elections if they run "as women" and therefore play into stereotypes rather than fighting them (Herrnson et. al 2003). UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is a prime example. She played into traditional gender roles (as favored by her party) by "leaning more to the housewife stereotype than to that of the radical feminist," thus curating her "skillful image creation" that ultimately facilitated her political success (Ponton 2010, p. 215).

Bauer (2015) argues that stereotypes must be specifically *activated*, whether it's through a campaign, attention drawn to a stereotypical trait, or media discourse in order to play a substantial role in affecting public perception of a female leader. COVID-19 presents an opportunity for stereotypes to be activated. In fact, Windsor et al. (2020) argue that "during a pandemic, the duality of expectations in the double bind actually positions women to thrive in their capacity as leaders" (p. 3) because the pandemic calls for both agentic *and* communal trait expression. Should female leaders be preferred during public health crises, it would provide a *health crisis advantage* for female politicians to serve as a counterpart to the advantage given men during crises of terrorism. Therefore, the question as to how public health crises impact the executive approval of female political leaders will thus be explored.

2 THEORY

A public health crisis on the scale of COVID-19 simply has not occurred in the public opinion polling era. As such, there is little indication of what type of leader the public would *prefer* in instances such as these. However, COVID-19 is not unlike other traditional threats to security such as terrorism. Like terrorism, COVID-19 poses such a significant risk to the country. Thus, like terrorist attacks, COVID-19 has the potential to generate rally effects and positive retrospective performance evaluations of leaders' handling of it. Most importantly, scholars have found evidence that the public has seen the pandemic as a time to evaluate the effectiveness and competence of their leaders through approval ratings (Bol et al. 2020; Piazza and Diaz 2020; Herrera et al. 2020; Yam et al. 2020).

Based on the foregoing discussion, the first foundational principle of my theory is that COVID-19 must be understood as a security threat. That is, as a public health threat, the pandemic is a special form of security threat. Because COVID-19 is highly dangerous, it naturally calls for strict and tight security measures, much like terrorism does. And like terrorism, pandemic response is associated with agentic leadership. However, it also is a public health issue that affects the health of the community. So, beyond the agentic traits needed to combat the pandemic quickly and authoritatively, leadership built on communal traits, such as empathy and caring, would seem to be at a premium during the pandemic, as well.

Because the global experience with COVID-19 implies the importance of both agentic and communal strategies to combat the pandemic, I therefore theorize that COVID-19, and public health crises more broadly, cannot be viewed solely as a threat that calls for only agentic *or* communal traits; rather, COVID-19 represents a new type of exogenous shock that is both a security and public health threat and thereby necessitates leaders who demonstrate both agentic

and communal traits. As such, I also theorize that for leaders to receive high(er) approval ratings during a public health crisis, a leader, regardless of their gender, must express traits and/or enact policy that reflect both agentic and communal strategies.

Because COVID-19, and public health crises more broadly, present a new type of exogenous shock that calls for both agentic *and* communal traits, I further theorize that the public demand for the type of leadership in this context will differ markedly from the type of male-centered agentic leadership desired in cases of terrorism. Although the expression of communal traits can certainly be helpful during terrorist attacks, it is often greatly overshadowed by agentic trait expression. In a study examining the preference for leadership, Laustsen and Petersen (2015) found that the presence of a human threat as opposed to a threat from nature “significantly increases the demands for dominant-looking leaders” (p. 292). This finding has important implications for the way we view different types of exogenous shocks. In cases involving other human groups (i.e. terrorism, war), individuals are more likely to seek dominant, agentic-style leadership as opposed to cases where the threat comes from nature (i.e. COVID-19). Furthermore, an important distinction between terrorism and a public health crisis and the implications they have on leadership preference revolves around the notions of a conflict-cooperation dichotomy wherein the public is more likely to prefer leaders with dominant and masculine features in times of conflict than in cooperation (Laustsen and Petersen 2017). Framing terrorism as a conflict and COVID-19 as a crisis that by nature demands widespread collective cooperation further explains why terrorism has such a strong association with masculine and agentic leadership while COVID-19 may yet present a new scenario that does not emphasize the masculine to the same degree.

While I theorize that crises of terrorism will still create a preference for male leaders acting agentially, I also argue that COVID-19 may diverge from the preference for male leadership. Considering much of the analysis on crisis leadership has been in the context of terrorism and war (i.e., conflict), most scholars acknowledge that traditional gender roles have played a role in characterizing political leadership in general to be more aligned with male-centered leadership that calls for the possession of more agentic traits (Aaldering and Van Der Pas 2020; Schneider and Bos 2014, 2019). Because women stereotypically lack agentic traits and may be perceived as more communally oriented, they may face intense challenges when it comes to fulfilling roles both as a woman and as a leader. In fact, Schneider and Bos (2014) find that female politicians were “characterized not by possession of typically female traits but by their deficiency in masculine traits,” (p. 259), indicating that the focus within female leadership still often circles back to traditionally conceived male-centered traits. This tendency to focus on the traits a leader is perceived to *lack* would be especially harmful to women in crises of terrorism, where agentic traits are strongly preferred (Holman et al. 2011; Lawless 2004). However, I argue that COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity for women leaders to distinguish themselves as a different type of leader that emphasizes communal traits while simultaneously engaging with agentic traits as well, possibly enabling them to bring positive attention to the ‘typically feminine traits’ that are so often ignored.

When it comes to trait expression, the demonstration of agentic traits is merely expected for men. Demonstrating agentic traits can sometimes result in role incongruity for women, wherein they are judged more harshly for demonstrating agentic traits if not ‘properly balanced’ with communal ones (Eagly and Karau 2002; Koenig et al. 2011; Schnieder and Bos 2019). This leads to an additional underlying assumption of my theory- that women, in addition to displaying

the agentic traits that COVID-19 as a security threat may necessitate, will also be expected to perform well on communal traits. Female politicians in general have already needed to demonstrate both agentic *and* communal traits to do well as political leaders (Hall and Donaghue 2013) and COVID-19 would hardly be an exception. However, because women are already stereotypically associated with communal traits and policy areas such as health care, COVID-19, as a public health crisis, may be seen as an exogenous shock condition that can provide women political leaders with an opportunity to use stereotyping strategically to improve approval ratings.

This proposition aligns with prior research. A 2010 study by Rosette and Tost found that women who were successful in their roles in high level positions were rated as both more agentic *and* more communal than their male counterparts. Furthermore, they also argue that once an individual woman leader is able to break the glass ceiling, they are more likely to be viewed as highly agentic with the added benefits of communal traits, giving them a leadership advantage over men in positions at the highest level (Rosette and Tost 2010). In addition, a cross-national 2020 study that found that voters preferred women as party leaders argued that they were rated more positively because “women are perceived to prioritize social welfare spending and ‘everyday issues’ such as health care” (Bridgewater and Nagel 2020, p. 5). Several other studies echo the notion that women may be evaluated more favorably when they run/rule “as women” and creatively use the stereotypes they are favorably associated with in order to garner further approval (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Hernnson et al. 2003; Piazza and Diaz 2020). Building off of these foundational studies, I theorize that while agentic and communal trait expression are necessary for both men and women to be viewed as competent in handling a public health crisis, women may experience higher levels of executive approval in the context of a health crisis in

comparison to men, reflecting the theory of stereotype activation and female leadership advantage. If true, this theory would illuminate a pattern of continued stereotypical trait-based gender bias in the public's perception of political leadership, as well as indicating a possible area of leadership advantage for women should the results reflect it.

2.1 Hypotheses

This theory can be surmised in a couple of hypotheses. The first hypothesis is,

Hypothesis 1 *Female political executives who demonstrate agentic and communal traits will receive a higher approval average in the event of an outbreak of a highly contagious virus than they will in a case of terrorism.*

This first hypothesis looks specifically at female political executives who demonstrate agentic and communal traits alone and provides the opportunity to test whether they are seen as more capable of handling an outbreak of a highly contagious virus than a case of terrorism. Should this hypothesis be supported, it could indicate that the public's approval is a result of gender-stereotypical beliefs when it comes to political issue competencies.

Hypothesis 2 *Female political executives who demonstrate agentic and communal traits will receive a lower approval average than male political executives who do the same in the case of terrorism.*

The second hypothesis provides the opportunity to test the long-held assumption that male political executives are preferred by the public, reflected in higher approval averages for men than women, during cases of terrorism. Should this hypothesis be supported, it would provide further evidence that men are perceived as 'better suited' for handling terrorism crises than women.

Hypothesis 3 *Female political executives who demonstrate agentic and communal traits will receive a higher approval average than male political executives who do the same in the case of an outbreak of a highly contagious virus.*

The third and final hypothesis tests the theory that the public may prefer female political executives who demonstrate agentic and communal traits, reflected in higher approval averages for women than men, in the case of an outbreak of a highly contagious virus. Should this hypothesis be supported, it would provide evidence that women may be perceived as 'better suited' for handling outbreaks of a highly contagious virus than men.

3 METHOD

3.1 Experiment Design

The hypotheses are tested using a survey experiment conducted on a convenience sample of 136 students at a large public university in the South. To gauge the public's evaluation of political leaders in the context of COVID-19, the study employs an experiment following Eagly and Karau's (2002) study that utilized the 'Goldberg Paradigm,' an experimental method inspired by Philip Goldberg (Goldberg 1968). The Goldberg Paradigm is a type of audit study/experimental method used to examine the causal impact of gender identity on the dependent variable in question. For example, to test inherent gender-based biases on otherwise equivalent candidates, researchers provide identical resumes to randomly assigned subjects for review but label half of the resumes with a name typical for a man while the other half receive the same resume but with a name typical for a woman (Rosen and Jerdee 1974, as qtd. in Eagly and Karau 2002). I apply this Goldberg paradigm to an experiment of my own, designed to similarly test the impact of gender identity on public perceptions of women political executives.

Table 3.1 Full 2x2 Factorial Design

		<i>National Crisis</i>	
		Terrorist Attack	Highly Contagious Virus
<i>Gender Identity</i>	Male	DV: Approval Rating	DV: Approval Rating
	Female	DV: Approval Rating	DV: Approval Rating

The study examines how female political executives are evaluated in the context of a highly contagious virus (term broadened from COVID-19 as inspiration) compared to the context of terrorism—holding traits constant. I employ a survey experiment with a full 2x2 factorial design (Table 3.1). One factor is leader gender, while the other is crisis domain. Participants are randomly assigned one of four hypothetical situations that befall a hypothetical country, ‘Commonland:’ Male Leader and Terrorist Attack (Case One), Male Leader and Highly Contagious Virus (Case Two), Female Leader and Terrorist Attack (Case Three), and Female Leader and Highly Contagious Virus (Case Four). These four different scenarios that ultimately represent the possible combinations between gender and type of national crisis, the survey experiment serves as a primary test of Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Finally, as mentioned, traits are held constant across the treatments. That is, the leaders in each scenario are imbued with agentic *and* communal traits. To test my theory about the nature of leadership preference in the context of COVID-19, I will compare mean level of executive approval following the treatments. The results will speak to the importance the traditional crisis context of terrorism in comparison to a public health crisis while also accounting for variation in the gender of the political executive.

3.1.1 Treatments

The experimental treatments correspond to gender identity and type of national crisis. Gender identity is operationalized via gender identification¹ (male or female) and national crisis is operationalized by type of crisis (terrorist attack or highly contagious virus).

3.1.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for the experiment is approval rating. Approval rating is operationalized via the numerical values assigned to participants' responses of approving/disapproving of the way the leader handles the crisis in their hypothetical scenario. After reading about how a hypothetical leader responded to the hypothetical crisis, respondents are asked to "Think of the way [Madam X or Mr. Y] responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of his performance?" Respondents then rate the leaders on their response on a scale from 1-5, where

- 1 = Strongly Disapprove
- 2 = Somewhat Disapprove
- 3 = Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
- 4 = Somewhat Approve
- 5 = Strongly Approve

¹ This study must operate within the traditional notion of a gender binary given the lack of literature and research regarding nonbinary individuals and how such identities interact with (cis)gendered and sex-based stereotypes in a political context. As such, the terms 'male/female' and 'man/woman' are used interchangeably in this study and refer to gender identity rather than sex.

3.1.3 Controls

To prevent confounding variables, the question wording and framing of the leader's response is kept the same throughout all four scenarios, with only the independent variables (leader's gender and type of national crisis) changing. All leader responses include both agentic and communal trait expression to prevent differences in leader evaluations arising from trait expression rather the manipulation of the independent variables. Furthermore, respondents are randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups to prevent bias.

3.2 Procedure

Participants for this experiment were recruited from undergraduate university students enrolled in political science courses utilizing extra credit points as an incentive for participation in the survey. Participants who volunteered via an online portal were directed via anonymous link to a Qualtrics survey. After having given informed consent, participants were then presented with a few demographic questions about age, gender, and political party identification (see Appendix). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four possible scenarios.

All participants were then presented with a scenario about a hypothetical country, called 'Commonland' (Figure 3.1). In the scenario, Commonland suffers a national crisis. Respondents were asked to evaluate how they felt the political leader handled the crisis in question, with options ranging on a 5-point response scale from 'strongly disapprove' to 'strongly approve.' Figure 3.1 details the question wording of the survey. Brackets indicate the manipulated variables (for full question wording of all possible scenarios, see Appendix).

Below you will read about a scenario about a hypothetical country.

Recently, the country of Commonland had a national crisis. [Terrorist Attack OR A Highly Contagious Virus] caused several people to be hospitalized and many lost their lives. [Madam X OR Mr Y], Commonland's elected political leader, responded by enforcing strict border closings and maintaining tight control of the situation. Additionally, [Madam X OR Mr Y] held frequent press conferences to soothe the public's concern and promoted national dialogue to comfort victims and lend a sympathetic ear to the people.

--

Think of the way [Madam X OR Mr Y] responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of his/her performance?

1= Strongly Disapprove
 2= Somewhat Disapprove
 3= Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
 4= Somewhat Approve
 5= Strongly Approve

Figure 3.1 Survey Questionnaire Template

Following the survey questionnaire, respondents were then directed to two post-survey questions designed to serve as manipulation checks². The first asks the respondent to recall the gender of the political leader in their hypothetical scenario (Figure 3.2). The second asks the respondent about how they would characterize the leader's response to the crisis (Figure 3.3).

In the previous description of Commonland's national crisis, was the political leader male or female?

☐ Male
☐ Female

Figure 3.2 Manipulation Check Question One

² Results of the manipulation check questions indicate that the manipulation of the IV of gender was successful. For Question One, 86.6% of respondents answered correctly. Question Two, checking perception of agentic and communal traits was less successful, with 54% of respondents answering correctly.

<p>In the previous description of Commonland's national crisis, would you characterize the actions of Commonland's leader as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Only Aggressive <input type="radio"/> Only Sympathetic <input type="radio"/> Both Aggressive and Sympathetic

Figure 3.3 Manipulation Check Question Two

3.3 Data

Data in the form of survey responses ($n = 136$)³ were anonymously collected and stored within the survey software, Qualtrics. Of the responses collected, 101 (74%) were completed by students who identified as women, 29 (21%) of the respondents as men, 2 (1%) as Non-binary/Third Gender, and 4 (3%) preferred not to specify. 121 (89%) respondents indicated that they were between the ages of 18 and 30. 65 (48%) respondents identified themselves as registered with the 'Democratic' party whereas 60 (44%) respondents answered 'Independent or None.' Only 5 (4%) of the sample identified as 'Republican' and 6 (4%) as 'Other.'

4 RESULTS

Survey responses were divided into four categories, one for each of the possible combinations they represent⁴. By obtaining the mean executive approval of each hypothetical scenario, comparison of the public perception of leaders' responses across the categories was more feasible. Figure 4.1 demonstrates the mean approval rating for the leader in each of the four hypothetical cases, with male executives who demonstrate both agentic and communal traits in the crisis context of a highly contagious virus (Male, Virus) receiving the greatest public favorability, demonstrated by the mean approval rating of 4.26. With all leaders demonstrating

³ 136 responses were collected, and 136 respondents answered at least the demographic questions but only 134 respondents fully completed the survey, leaving two missing data points for the regression analysis.

⁴ Case One (Male, Terrorism) $n = 34$; Case Two (Male Virus) $n = 35$; Case Three (Female, Terrorism) $n = 33$; Case Four (Female, Virus) $n = 34$.

identical agentic and communal trait expression, the female executives during the virus context (Female, Virus) had the second highest average approval at 3.97, followed by female executives leading during terrorism (Female, Terrorism) at 3.78, with male executives during terrorism (Male, Terrorism) having the lowest average approval rating at 3.41 (see Figure 4.1).

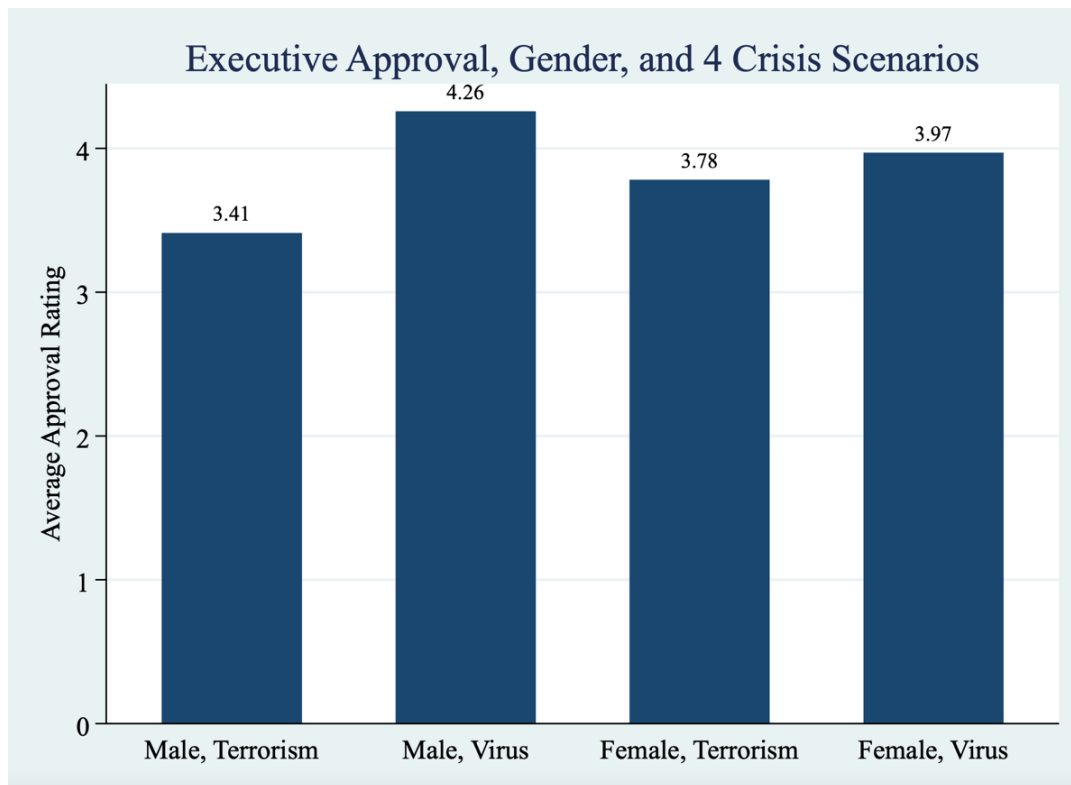


Figure 4.1 Average Executive Approval, All Scenarios

Figure 4.1 offers partial support for Hypothesis One. Within the context of female executives who demonstrate agentic and communal trait expression, females did indeed receive a higher approval average during the virus crisis context (3.97) than they did in the case of terrorism (3.78). That female executives received higher approval in the public health context could indicate that the population may still harbor gender biases and see females as ‘better suited’ to handling health-related issues rather than security issues such as terrorism. To test whether this finding was statistically significant, I ran a regression- referred to as Model 1 in

Table 4.1- using (Female, Virus) as the reference category. Regression analysis⁵ indicated that the difference in average approval rating between female executives during the case of terrorism as compared to females leading in the virus context is not statistically significant, thereby limiting generalizability and further support for Hypothesis One (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Female Executive Approval During Highly Contagious Virus

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)	(Model 4)
VARIABLES	mean_score	mean_score	mean_score	mean_score
1. Male, Terrorism	-0.558** (0.218)		-0.845*** (0.215)	-0.369* (0.220)
2. Male, Virus	0.287 (0.216)	0.845*** (0.215)		0.476** (0.218)
3. Female, Terrorism	-0.188 (0.221)	0.369* (0.220)	-0.476** (0.218)	
4. Female, Virus		0.558** (0.218)	-0.287 (0.216)	0.188 (0.221)
Constant	3.970*** (0.155)	3.412*** (0.153)	4.257*** (0.151)	3.781*** (0.158)
Observations	134	134	134	134
R-squared	0.111	0.111	0.111	0.111

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

⁵ Demographic variables omitted in Table 4.1 due to null results. The only demographic factor to return significant results was the ‘Other’ political affiliation with a p< 0.1, likely a result of small sample size.

Results do not provide support for Hypothesis Two, challenging the long-held assumptions of current literature that indicate male executives would receive more favorable approval than female executives during crises of terrorism. Instead, female executives received a higher executive approval average (3.78) than did male executives (3.41) in the terrorism crisis context. To test whether this difference was statistically significant, I ran a second regression (see Model 2 in Table 4.1) using (Male, Terrorism) as the reference category. The results of the regression demonstrate that female executives behaving agentially and communally in a terrorist crisis context do receive statistically significant higher levels of executive approval than male executives who demonstrate identical behavior (Table 4.1). While Hypothesis Two is not supported, the results of the study are still important because they actually indicate the *reverse* of the hypothesis- women behaving agentially and communally in response to a terrorist incident receive higher approval than men who behave the same.

Outside of the direct comparison between male and female leaders during terrorism crises, Model 2 can still inform other conclusions. Model 2 helps demonstrate the statistically significant effect of the *type* of crisis *within* the male gender category. Model 2 thus utilizes (Male, Terrorism) as the reference category and finds that the difference in executive approval average between (Male, Terrorism) and (Male, Virus) was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) (Table 4.1). As such, these findings would indicate that, for male executives specifically, the type of crisis *does* play a role in shaping executive approval. Counter to assumptions informed by extant literature that male executives would perform best in terrorist crises, the results of this study indicate that male executives are more likely to receive favorable approval ratings in public health crises, although it must be noted that traditional terrorism and leadership literature tends to focus on males behaving agentially specifically; the possibility that these unexpected findings

differ from extant literature may be explained by the hypothetical male leader demonstrating communal traits in addition to agentic traits, more of which will be discussed in the following section.

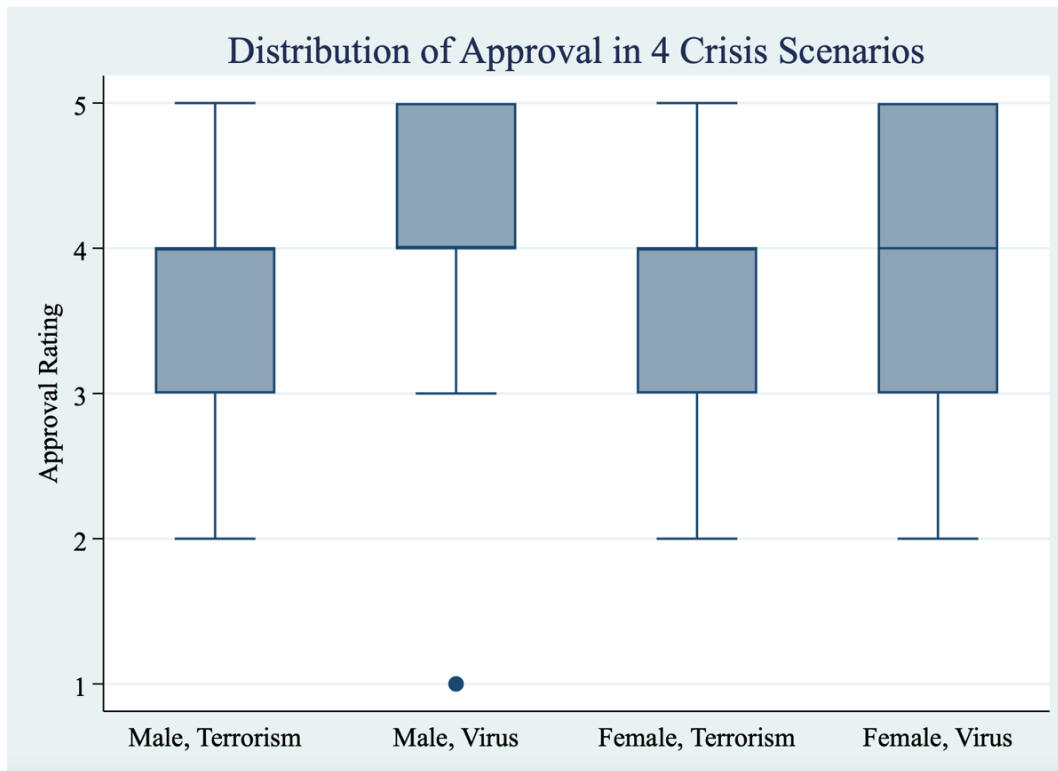


Figure 4.2 Distribution of Survey Responses

Although Hypothesis Two could not be supported, the results do ultimately indicate an interesting finding worthy of further research. It may then be that crisis context does not necessarily matter in the case of female executives, but that it does matter in the case of male executives. Figure 4.2 highlights the distribution of approval ratings and notable differences exist between the categories of (Male, Terrorism) and (Male, Virus). Responses were much more varied in evaluating male executives in the case of terrorism than they were for male executives in the case of a highly contagious virus. Approval ratings of male executives in the virus context were more highly concentrated in areas of higher approval, further indicating that male

executives are more likely to receive higher approval more consistently in the virus context than in the case of terrorism.

When it comes to examining executive approval within the specific context of a public health crisis, Hypothesis 3, which predicted females would receive higher approval averages than males in a virus context, is not supported by the results of this study. Male executives received higher approval in the virus context (4.26) than did female executives (3.97) (Figure 4.1). However, the difference between the two approval averages are *not* statistically significant, thereby limiting the generalizability of this particular finding (Table 4.1). The fact that female executives did not receive statistically significant higher levels of approval in the public health crisis context challenges the application of the *female leadership advantage* in Hypothesis 3 within the context of this specific theory.

5 CONCLUSION

The survey experiment yielded unexpected results that ultimately did not support the theory presented in this paper. Before discussing what conclusions can be drawn from this research, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, the first being the small sample size limiting its generalizability. In addition, the study overall was not very representative; with 74% of respondents identifying as female and 92% having either 'Democratic' or 'Independent/None' political affiliation, the respondent pool clearly does not reflect the population as a whole.

Furthermore, an additional limitation coming from demographic aspects of the sample is age; with 89% of respondents between the ages of 18-30, many students were either not yet born or too young to remember 9/11, which impacts their lived experience with the crisis contexts provided in this study. This is especially important to note since we are actively living in the time of COVID-19 and thus reflect on it much more regularly and can draw upon personal experience

when evaluating similar hypothetical situations that relate to pandemics that perhaps wouldn't come as easily for cases of terrorism.

It is also important to note the limitation that arises from a failed manipulation check. While the manipulation of the gender variable was successful, only half of the respondents correctly identified the communal and agentic nature of the leaders' responses. After further review, a possible reason that respondents did not correctly identify both traits could be because characterizing the agentic response as 'aggressive' may be misleading to respondents not aware of the context. 'Strict' or 'decisive' may have been better terms to note the agentic response and could have led to a more successful manipulation of the traits expressed.

Perhaps the most relevant limitation of this study is one that necessitates further review and consideration from the field as a whole, and that is the operationalization of *communal traits/behavior*. Crisis leadership literature has focused overwhelmingly on agentic, security-based crises and thus gives the phrase *agentic traits* very clear meaning, i.e. strict, aggressive, controlling, etc. However, when it comes to understanding the description of *communal*, traits are hard to define and behavior even harder, making comparison on this front challenging. I thus would encourage the field to investigate ways we can better conceptualize and operationalize communal traits, behavior, and policies in order to strengthen our methodologies.

As far as the conclusions that can be drawn from this study, I found that counter to expectations, female executives did not receive higher approval rating than their male counterparts in the context of a public health crisis. This is not to say that the approval was not high (because it was, at 3.97) but that it simply was not as high as average executive approval for males during the virus (4.26). Furthermore, because the difference in average approval between male and female executives was not statistically significant, conclusions about gender

differences are limited. The lack of significant differences between genders in the virus context does not support the application of *female leadership advantage* in the context of public health crises as compared to terrorism. Even when the hypothetical female executives in the study behaved in a way that combined agentic and communal traits to address a crisis which historically has been seen as more of a 'woman's domain' of politics, they did not reap the benefits of melding with stereotypes as some literature would suggest. However, it is also important to note that studies of *female leadership advantage* are often based on leadership in the broad sense of the term, and *expectations* of leadership based on gender identity, rather than looking at demonstrated political behavior of leaders, especially in contexts that may call for communal characteristics like COVID-19. Based on these factors, coupled with the limitations of my own research design, I would urge further replication to explore the theory proposed in this paper and the possibility that *female leadership advantage* could still be applied to understanding the executive approval of female leaders during COVID-19.

Looking at female political executives specifically, the results of the study are still encouraging. Even though they may not have an advantage over men in public health crises, it is important to note that they are not evaluated significantly differently from men, which points to the possibility that perhaps amongst leaders demonstrating both agentic and communal traits in response to a crisis that necessitates both sets of traits, political executive gender does not matter. In other words, COVID-19 may turn out to be a type of crisis that actually levels the playing field, especially in comparison to traditional crisis context of terrorism. Not only are women evaluated on par with men in the virus context, but female executives are also evaluated fairly equally (and highly) in both the terrorism and virus context, indicating that perhaps biases about

gender and areas of political competence have lessened. Overall, the study offers positive results for female executives, a feat that should not be ignored.

When it comes to male leadership, this study in some ways demonstrated the inverse of what my theory predicted. Some of the most statistically significant differences in approval occurred within the context of male executives rather than females. The results of this study demonstrated that male executives are more likely to receive favorable approval during the public health crisis context rather than terrorism. This finding does present an important challenge to existing literature that maintains that terrorism- a security context calling for strong, agentic responses- is naturally the most favorable condition for male executives. Instead, it seems that male executives who respond in a way that couples agentic and communal traits in response to a public health crisis will receive the most favorable approval ratings. A possible explanation for the discrepancy in the evaluation of male executives based on crisis context could be that men who behave agentially *and* communally in response to a terrorist incident are punished for behaving *counter-stereotypically* due to the conflation of communal traits with the female gender identity. Previous research in the field regarding terrorism and crisis leadership has only accounted for male leaders behaving in stereotypically agentic ways to a crisis typically associated with agentic traits. However, based on these results, I would advise the field to further investigate the impact of communal trait expression for males in terrorist crises specifically to examine if gender bias may still be at work but through the lens of punishing men for being counter-stereotypic. In contrast to terrorism, the results of this study, when generalized to today's current public health crisis, would indicate that male executives should not shy away from the employment of communal traits when addressing the issue of COVID-19 for they are likely to receive favorable evaluations.

Ultimately, this study would ideally serve as a facilitator of further research. While the research design had its limitations, the theory presented in this paper is more grounded and merits continued examination by the field. What the results of this study do show is that crisis context and trait expression does matter, especially when a new type of crisis like COVID-19 calls for leadership that places greater emphasis on communal traits than crises of the past. COVID-19 has provided a new evaluative context for political leaders and it may just change the way we come to view ideal leadership in the future.

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APPENDIX

This appendix includes the full format of the questionnaire, apart from the informed consent form. Demographic questions are listed first, followed by the question wording for all possible scenarios, and concluding with the manipulation check questions.

Below are the three demographic questions. The first question is on the matter of gender.

- What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary/ Third Gender
 - Prefer not to say

The second question is on the matter of age.

- What is your age?
 - 0-17
 - 18-30
 - 31-50
 - 50-65
 - 65 or older

The third question is on the matter of political party identification.

- What political party are you registered with, if any? (ANES 2020)
 - Democratic Party
 - Republican Party
 - None or 'independent'
 - Other

The second section includes all possible question wording for each of the four scenarios.

The first possible question wording is for Case One: Male Leader, Terrorist Attack

- Below you will read about a hypothetical country named Commonland.

Recently, the country of Commonland had a national crisis. A terrorist attack caused several people to be hospitalized and many lost their lives. Mr. Y,

Commonland's elected political leader, responded by enforcing strict border closings and maintaining tight control of the situation.

Additionally, Mr. Y held frequent press conferences to soothe the public's concern and promoted national dialogue to comfort victims and lend a sympathetic ear to the people.

--

Think of the way Mr. Y responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of his performance?

- 1= Strongly Disapprove
- 2= Somewhat Disapprove
- 3= Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
- 4= Somewhat Approve
- 5= Strongly Approve

The second question wording is for Case Two: Male Leader, Highly Contagious Virus

- Below you will read about a hypothetical country named Commonland.

Recently, the country of Commonland had a national crisis. A highly contagious virus caused several people to be hospitalized and many lost their lives. Mr. Y, Commonland's elected political leader, responded by enforcing strict border closings and maintaining tight control of the situation.

Additionally, Mr. Y held frequent press conferences to soothe the public's concern and promoted national dialogue to comfort victims and lend a sympathetic ear to the people.

--

Think of the way Mr. Y responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of his performance?

- 1= Strongly Disapprove
- 2= Somewhat Disapprove
- 3= Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
- 4= Somewhat Approve
- 5= Strongly Approve

The third possible question wording is for Case Three: Female Leader, Terrorist Attack

- Below you will read about a hypothetical country named Commonland.

Recently, the country of Commonland had a national crisis. A terrorist attack caused several people to be hospitalized and many lost their lives. Madam X, Commonland's elected political leader, responded by enforcing strict border closings and maintaining tight control of the situation.

Additionally, Madam X held frequent press conferences to soothe the public's concern and promoted national dialogue to comfort victims and lend a sympathetic ear to the people.

--

Think of the way Madam X responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of her performance?

- 1= Strongly Disapprove
- 2= Somewhat Disapprove
- 3= Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
- 4= Somewhat Approve
- 5= Strongly Approve

The last question wording is for Case Four: Female Leader, Highly Contagious Virus

- Below you will read about a hypothetical country named Commonland.

Recently, the country of Commonland had a national crisis. A terrorist attack caused several people to be hospitalized and many lost their lives. Madam X, Commonland's elected political leader, responded by enforcing strict border closings and maintaining tight control of the situation.

Additionally, Madam X held frequent press conferences to soothe the public's concern and promoted national dialogue to comfort victims and lend a sympathetic ear to the people.

--

Think of the way Madam X responded to the crisis. Would you say you strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither disapprove nor approve, somewhat approve, or strongly approve of her performance?

- 1= Strongly Disapprove
- 2= Somewhat Disapprove
- 3= Neither Disapprove Nor Approve
- 4= Somewhat Approve
- 5= Strongly Approve

The third section includes the two manipulation check questions, asked following a required response to the survey question. All survey respondents were given the same two manipulation check questions.

The first manipulation check question asks the survey respondent to recall the gender of the political executive in the scenario they just read about.

- Question One: In the previous description of Commonland's national crisis, was the political leader male or female?

- Male
- Female

The second manipulation check question asks the survey respondent to characterize the response of the political executive in the scenario they just read about.

- Question Two: In the previous description of Commonland's national crisis, would you characterize the actions of Commonland's leader as
 - Only Aggressive
 - Only Sympathetic
 - Both Aggressive and Sympathetic